

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Senator Cardin writes periodic columns for Maryland publications. The following column about his appointment as Chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission may be of interest to your readers. Please contact Susan Sullam at [susan\\_sullam@cardin.senate.gov](mailto:susan_sullam@cardin.senate.gov) if you have any questions.

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***PRECEDENCE:** Senator Cardin is a member of five Senate committees: Foreign Relations, Judiciary, Environment and Public Works, Budget, and Small Business and Entrepreneurship. His web site is: [cardin.senate.gov](http://cardin.senate.gov). He also can be found at [YouTube.com/SenatorCardin](http://YouTube.com/SenatorCardin)*

## I AM COMMITTED TO ENSURING THE U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION WILL ADVANCE U.S. FOREIGN POLICY GOALS

By U.S. Senator Benjamin L. Cardin

In 1975, 35 nations – including the United States and the Soviet Union – signed one of the most important international documents to protect human rights and the rule of law. It was the Helsinki Final Act, and it forms the basis for addressing military security, economic cooperation and human rights in Europe. Today, a total of 56 nations are signatories to the Final Act and are members of the Organization for Security & Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a leading international organization promoting democracy and human rights.

I recently had the honor of being appointed chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission for the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress. The U.S. Helsinki Commission is an independent U.S. agency charged with monitoring and encouraging implementation of the Final Act by the 56 OSCE participating nations. The Commission consists of nine members from the U.S. Senate, nine from the House of Representatives and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce.

As chairman, I recently lead a congressional delegation trip to Syria, Israel and Vienna. In Israel, we met officials from both the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. In Syria, we had productive discussions with President Bashar al-Assad and we visited the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees facility to assess the situation of Iraqi refugees in Syria. We then traveled to Vienna for the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Winter meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Parliamentary Assembly.

The Helsinki Final Act created a framework for focusing world attention on human-rights abuses. The Commission, in partnership with a number of leading human rights groups, has given a powerful voice to those who are often too weak or downtrodden to speak for themselves. I am extremely proud to be part of a process that helps bring hope to those who yearn for peace and freedom.

Particularly relevant today, the Helsinki Final Act contains a very important

section entitled: “Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.” In the last 34 years, this pledge has formed an underpinning for monitoring human-rights abuses, impacting hundreds of millions of people worldwide.

In putting a spotlight on human rights, the Helsinki Final Act has helped bring attention to the persecution of different minority and religious groups, the plight of refugees, and the abuse of people involved in extracting natural minerals. I recently met with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to discuss the need to address these serious human-rights abuses. I am pleased that she expressed strong support for working with the U.S. Helsinki Commission to foster a strong human-rights agenda.

I also am pleased that the new Obama administration has begun the process of closing the Guantánamo Bay Detention Center and has moved swiftly to return U.S. foreign policy to its core principle of respect for the rule of law. As Chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, I will be working with Secretary Clinton and the new Administration to restore America’s leadership in the world and demonstrate to the global community that we, as a nation, can respect the rule of law and human rights without sacrificing security or our core principles of individual liberty and freedom.

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